FREDERICK C. DAVIS

PLANE JANE

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Don't go wonderin' if I'm a expert on the subject, but ain't there a kind of girl that looks her prettiest when she's wearin' a kitchen dress and rollin' out biscuits? And ain't there another sort of girl who transforms herself into the most beautiful when she appears in a filmy evenin' gown and waits for you to waft her out into the moonlight? Then there's another that becomes the one and only when she is wool from head to toe and cuddlin' beside you on a toboggan. And there's one who is a shade above Venus when she comes slashin' out of the surf glistenin' and lithe and fresh.

Jane Alton wasn't any of these kinds, but, oh, what a dream she was in a flyin' suit! Jane was born to ornament the air. With a stick in her hand and flyin' joy in her eyes, she was an angel—and, of course, bein' an angel, she belonged in the sky. She put herself there every chance she got!

It was a mornin' full of smooth air and high visibility when Jane came rompin' around the hangars, shinin' leather all over and, seein' us, smiled brighter 'n the sun and ran straight for our plane.

Ned Knight was in the fore cubby, jazzin' the motor, ready for a take-off. He grinned and remarked over his shoulder:

"Benny, ol' nut-twister, here's where you lose your seat, back there. Jane's all set to take another trip to her home port, Heaven, and there's no use tryin' to stop her. Better start gettin' out."

I'd already begun startin', and I was all the way out when Jane came up laughin'.

"Thank you, you ol' darlin'," she said to me, and I ain't so old, either. "I can't wait another minute to get up into all that glorious sky. Ned, would you mind changin' back to Benny's seat?"

"What!" barked Ned. "Listen, Jane. I'm takin' this little Alton up for a check-ride. Your Dad is waitin' for the data on it. Just this time won't you ride in back, just this once, and lemme—"

"Ned Knight," came back Jane, "am I not the holder of a pilot's license?"

"Yes, but—"

"Haven't you, my only instructor, pronounced me to be a flyer equal to any other you know?"

"You sure are, Jane, but—"

"Can't I handle that stick and do a good job of gatherin' data myself?"

"I'm not sayin' you can't, but—"

"Do you want me to go up in another plane, *without you*, Ned Knight?"

"No!" said Ned, and so he began gettin' out!

Me, I couldn't 've held out half that long against Jane Alton. I was plenty crazy about that girl, but bein' only a grease-monkey, and havin' a map resemblin' a mauled-up bulldog's, I confined myself to bein' just her slave. Ned Knight, however, being the best flyer in the state, and the handsomest in six, got a lot of time from her. I suspected maybe that there was some kind of romance goin' on there, between the flyer and the daughter of the plant owner, 'cause they flew a lot together, those two.

So, with Ned back in the rear pit, Jane climbed into

the front one, settled to the controls, jazzed the motor, and waved one tiny gloved hand to me. I socked the blocks; she stepped on the gas; and the Alton was off. It trundled to the other edge of the sand, and Jane pulled it up neatly; she circled twice, got herself a nice lot of altitude, rode a few air waves in sheer joy, and then deadheaded across the blue.

Now and then she cut the motor. Say, there wasn't any tellin' what went on between them two, all alone up there, so close to Heaven! I know they didn't exactly dislike the open solitude of that sky! I remember once, when Jane hopped out of the Alton, after a spell of hootin' with Ned, she said to him: "I *love* to be all alone with you up there!" And Ned was never quite the same when he came down from a flit with Jane, anyhow!

Well, while the Alton was banking and skimming at about a thousand, Robert Bennett Alton himself came out onto the field. He was owner of the field, and of the factory where the Altons were made. He was manufacturing a sturdy, speedy, almost foolproof plane that was just about the ultimate in aviation on a small scale. A man dissatisfied with anything short of perfection—that was Alton. And a fine man, in and out from the heart. He stood beside me, watching his little moth weave across the sky.

"What a ship!" I said. "What a joy of a ship!"

"It seems to handle well, Benny," was all Alton said. "What—what's that?"

Starin', I went cold. From the front of the plane some black smoke spouted out; and then came the flashin' of fire. Fire it was! The nose of that plane was bein' licked by the flames leapin' back from the engine. One second it had been all o. k., and the next it was pushin' a bonfire through the sky! If the fire reached the gasoline lines and the tank—if it kindled the linen—it meant disaster! And I, myself, I had inspected that ship to make sure it was o. k. All but passin' out, I continued to stare, and Mr. Alton got as white as the clouds.

"Benny, who's pilotin' that ship?"

"Jane!"

"What!"

Now the plane was sideslippin' away from the flames; it tore off them, and they disappeared.

"And Jane knows her stuff!" I shouted.

Once havin' snapped away from the danger, Jane

dove at full throttle, but the fire flashed out again, worse than before. As soon as it did, Jane sideslipped again, and the wind put the fire out. This time when she recovered she banked steep, gradually losin' altitude and made for the T. Mushin' out, she cut the gun, and the Alton glided for the sand. The fire popped out again, not so bad this time, but bad enough!

The burnin' ship trundled in, and before it stopped Ned Knight was out of it. Jane jumped right behind him. Ned scooped up sand and threw it on the fire, and Jane worked just as fast. Mr. Alton and me and some of the other boys ran for the ship, but by the time we got there, the fire was all out.

Ned Knight, plenty mad, stepped up to me chin first. "Benny, your job is to keep these ships in trim, ain't it—'specially this one, that's goin' to fly the race—or was! Then how come the timin' is off, and fire got sucked back into the carburetor? I'll bet my hat that the screen and drain is in bad shape, too, you—. Good gosh!"

"Well, I got it out all right, didn't I?" inquired Jane, who seemed to think that any scrape wasn't very bad if she got out of it alive.

"You sure did! You got us out like a veteran. Jane, you're all right. Benny, dang you—"

I wasn't wastin' time standin' there and bein' bawled out. I put my head into that motor, and it took only a minute for me to find out that some monkey business had been goin on—grease-monkey business! The engine had been tampered with. Our pet Alton! The ship we were dressin' for the race! And with Jane in it! Lord!

I whirled around and barked out my troubles. And then there was plenty of quiet for a minute.

* * * * *

Ned Knight moved first. Some other members of the hangar crew had come out to share the excitement. He singled out a pilot named Stud Walker, and stepped right up to him. Ugly eyes that man had, and an ugly face, and an ugly heart—Walker. His eyes sort of flashed with fear, and he tried to back away, but Ned had him nailed.

"Walker, lemme ask you some questions! Last night, while I was fussin' around the field, I heard somebody inside this Alton's hangar. That was strange. By the time I got it unlocked, and went inside, the noises stopped, and the hangar was empty. But I found a hole in the sand, under the tin wall, that was fresh dug, and that hole was hid by two empty oil barrels.

You know anything about that? I'll answer for you. You know *all* about it. You're the man that tampered with the plane!"

"You can't prove—" Walker gulped.

"Your guilty face proves it for me! I'm goin' to smash—"

Ned began to sail in with both hands and feet, but I grabbed him. While he was talkin', two other greaseballs had got behind Walker, and blocked his retreat. Also, they kept Ned from killin' him. And right then Mr. Robert Bennett Alton himself stepped up and spoke.

"Ned, if you're accusin' this man of tamperin' with that plane, I hope you can prove what you say."

"Mr. Alton," Ned came back, "some time ago I caught Walker tappin' a gin bottle on the field, and ever since then I've been watchin' him. A few days ago he acted funny. I watched closer. After dark a sedan drew up, and Walker got in. The car stayed, and I watched it. Inside it was Gifford, at the wheel—Gifford, of the Stormbird people. He and Walker were talkin' low. Then I saw Gifford pass money to Walker. That is proof enough for me that he's in Gifford's pay,

working against us. He was clever enough to jim the plane so I couldn't find the trouble last night, but he's got now!"

Walker looked plenty sick. Alton looked at him, and he couldn't look back. He might 've killed Ned Knight and Jane—Jane!—with his trick, done for pay. He couldn't face the man that had hired him out of good faith.

"Walker, you look guilty!" Alton spoke up. "You've tried to cripple us in favor of the Stormbird people—so they can win over us, of course, in the air derby tomorrow. Thank the Lord you won't have a chance to get in any more of your dirty work! The Stormbirds are so afraid that we'll outfly them that they have to hire crooks to beat us, eh? Do you know, Walker, that you could be jailed for what you've done?"

Walker was white around the gills.

"Walker, I don't want to bother with you. I think too little of you and what you've done to prefer charges against you. Now, Walker, get off this field. Get off! If you show your face on it again, man, I'll break you with my bare hands!"

Alton didn't usually say much, but this was plenty

for the occasion, and he meant every word. Alton's contempt was worse than a lickin' for Walker to take. Let loose, he shambled away, looks of disgust and hate followin' him. When he disappeared around the hangars, the field seemed like a better place to stay.

Mr. Alton spoke quietly now to the boys, askin' 'em to look over the planes careful, suggestin' that a guard be put around the hangars tonight so that nothin' could happen to the planes before the start of the air race the next day; and they'd better keep a gun handy; and—

"Ned!" Jane called out, not bein' able to hold herself in any longer. "Please, let's get another plane out and go right back up!"

* * * * *

"Jane," Mr. Alton said, "I want to talk with Ned a little, so you'd better let the flyin' go a while. Benny, is that ship damaged much?"

"No, sir," I answered. "By adjusting the timer and putting in a screen, and some new ignition wires—they're burned off—she'll be shipshape again."

"Start on it right away," Mr. Alton told me. "Ned, how did the ship feel today?"

"Better than ever before," Knight answered. "Jane was at the stick, but I could feel the pull of the new prop. We get the proper revs now when we're climbing."

"The stabilizer?"

"Works like a dream. The ship's as steady as a Rolls Royce on Fifth Avenue and she stays that way. Also, it's easier to hold her head up. And the ailerons can be used when she's throttled way down—that's somethin' that's improved with the new prop and stabilizer. She's ready for any race now, Mr. Alton."

"Good!" said the Boss.

The boys'd been helpin' me to roll the plane tail-to into the hangar, and then, leavin' Mr. Alton, Jane, Ned and me in there alone, they went back to work. I tore off the old ignition wires while Mr. Alton talked.

"Ned, are you ready to fly your best tomorrow? Goin' to reach Curtiss ahead of all the other entries, are you?"

"Sure he is!" spoke up Jane. "I'm his mascot!"

"I think your plane is a better flyer than any other in the line-up, Mr. Alton," Ned answered. "The Stormbird will tail us, but we'll win."

"I hope so!" Mr. Alton came back, sighin'. "Ned, I'm goin' to take you into my confidence. You're goin' to pilot that ship tomorrow, and Benny will be along with you, and you both ought to know that I'm bankin' on you boys heavily. Aside from the purse—which, of course, the pilot is goin' to keep, for he's the man that is goin' to earn it—the reputation of the Alton is at stake. The number of accidents that have happened recently in Altons has given us a black-eye, Ned—you know that."

"People'll forget that when we zip across the finish field first," Ned answered.

"They will—if we win," Mr. Alton answered. "That will help. But that's not all. That ill will has hurt our business. We have been runnin' on a shoestring—and we've just about reached the end of it. We need the winnin' place in this race because of the good it will do our business. If we don't come in number one, Ned, I'm afraid that we'll have to be closing up the plant soon."

Ned got pale, and I forgot work, and Jane listened plumb excited. Mr. Alton was talkin' in a low, serious tone. Since the Alton plant was all any of us had in life right then, it was serious. We knew business had been bad, but we never suspected it was that bad—

never suspected that this air derby was becomin' a life and death matter for Alton planes.

"I'll explain a little more," Mr. Alton went on, solemn and quiet. "You know that the United Airways is holding up a large order of planes—enough to keep us busy for the better part of a year—and will place its order dependin' on the outcome of the race tomorrow. They're lookin' for speed and stamina, and they think they'll find it in the winnin' ship. I had a talk with Finley, the manager, last night. 'Win the race, and I'll place my order with you,' he said. That's how the matter stands. And that United order, if we get it, will save our lives."

Lord!

"There are other orders in the balance, too," Mr. Alton went on. "The government is going to give the winner some places in the air mail and border patrol fleets, to replace the antiquated DeHavilands. There's a passenger airport in Texas that I've been tryin' to land, that's waitin' for the winner to take the order away from it. I could name half a dozen more such examples; but it isn't necessary.

"You understand, Ned, that when you fly tomorrow, you'll be flyin' to win—win not only the purse

for yourself, but a new life for us. And if you lose—but we won't think about that now. You're goin' to win."

"Yes, sir," said Ned. "We're goin' to win!" He gave a look at Jane, and Jane's eyes sparkled. "There's still another reason why I'm goin' to win, Mr. Alton!"

"There is?"

"A pilot that ain't married usually hasn't got a habit of savin' his money—and I've spent all mine, till lately. But if I had to buy a house and a lot of furniture, right now, I couldn't do it. But with that purse in my pocket—five thousand dollars—it wouldn't be so hard! I want to do that, Mr. Alton. I want to win that race, and then step up to you, and say, 'Sir, I want to marry your daughter!'"

Mr. Alton smiled. "From Jane's conversation at home, which has just two subjects—flyin' and Ned—I'd suspected the situation." He chuckled. "I'd rather have a pilot for a son-in-law than anybody else, and of all the pilots I know, you rate highest with me, Ned. Well, after you win that race, and step up to me, and say your say, I'll talk with you about it!"

"Thanks!"

Mr. Alton walked out of the hangar, havin' said *his* say to us—which was plenty. For a few minutes I was stunned. Things was comin' too fast for me. That whole big plant, out there, was in danger of vanishin'. Those peppy little Altons were in danger of eventually droppin' out of the air. Altons had been the subject of our talk and dreams for years, and if they went—it would be worse than a death in the family. And yet, there the whole matter was, flat up and lookin' us in the face— and all of us swore, right then, that this Alton *had* to win that race!

I turned and got to work on it—and how I began to work!

Somethin' that happened behind me sounded a whole lot like a kiss.

"So!" said Jane Alton. "You think, do you, Ned Knight, that you're goin' to win me in a race as though I was a kewpie doll on a rack?"

"Why—"

"And if you don't win the race, you won't ask me to marry you at all?"

"Well, gosh!"

"Young man," said Jane in her most business-like manner, "I have somethin' to say to you—in private!"

She tugged him out of the hangar. Beyond the doors I could hear 'em whisperin'. Then they moved away, and I didn't see either of 'em again that day—because I wasn't lookin' at anythin' but that plane.

I worked on her like a maniac. I forgot lunch and dinner and kept workin' on her till my arms were about ready to drop off. I wouldn't let anybody else touch her. I tested her everywhere, tuned her to the prettiest pitch she could give, tightened her everywhere she would tighten. There wasn't any dingus on that plane that I overlooked. When I called a halt it was after midnight.

Then I put blankets beside her, and tried to go to sleep; but I couldn't sleep. I had to get up and look her over again. Every half hour after that I was up, to make sure I'd tested somethin' that I thought I *might* have overlooked. I couldn't stay away from that plane. Too much was dependin' on it and the shape it was in.

And at last, as I was for the tenth time feelin' over the control wires, I saw light comin' through the cracks of the door, and I knew it was tomorrow.

The day of the Trans-state Air Derby had come!

* * * * *

It was the day of days. All over the country, airplane makers had been lookin' forward to this day, and preparin' for it. Every maker of light planes was goin' to be represented with the best job they could turn out. A string of single-motored planes was goin' to line up, every one ready to do its best, and compete for the championship—and the competition was goin' to be murder! A big Commission was behind the project, directin' it. Newspapers all over the world were runnin' notices of it, 'cause the results were goin' to be official; and the winner's name was goin' to be written right into air history in big red letters.

There'd been guards outside the hangar all night; and when a knock came, I opened the doors. Ned Knight, fresh and dapper, came in, bringin' a early mornin' paper. He showed it to me. Splashed all over the front page was big headlines: *Planes Ready For Big Cross Country Race!* There below was the list of makers: Alton, Stormbird, Zephyr, Lightning, Ranbros, Impco, and all of 'em. And then the pilot's name: Alton carryin' Ben Benson and piloted by Ned Knight. Stormbird carryin' William Carson and piloted by—

"Good gosh, Ned!" I busted out. "That must be a misprint!"

"Nope, Benny; it must be true. Stormbird's made a change in pilots at the last minute."

Right there in black and white it said that the pilot of the Stormbird entry was goin' to be Stud Walker! Stud Walker, the self-same crook that we'd fired off the field—who had been in Stormbird pay, and jimmed our plane! It was easy to see that Stormbird was usin' him because Walker would be hell-bent to beat us out, for our handlin' of him. We were goin' to have a real enemy flyin' against us!

"Gosh!" I croaked. "Ned, we can sure count on Walker's beatin' us if he possibly can. He'll fly like a wild man to beat us!"

"I'm goin' to do some flyin' myself," Ned came back. "Is the plane ready, Benny? If it is, we'd better be gettin' over the field. We've got to check in and get lined up. Mr. Alton has drawn third place for us."

"Third? Who's second and first?"

"Impco is second."

"And—?"

"Stormbird is first."

"Hang it all! They're gettin' the breaks all around. I suppose it figures out all right in the end, but— I hate to have 'em leadin' us at the very start!"

"Benny, aren't you goin to dress up? Those overalls of yours 're dirty enough to walk around by themselves."

"I wouldn't change 'em for a suit of ermine, Ned," I answered. "They may be dirty as mud, but I love 'em!"

Then, Ned tells me, we should be on our way. We roll the plane out, and block her; Ned gets in, contacts her, and we pump the prop. She roars off, higher and higher, and the engine begins to warm and sing a sweet song. When she's hot, she's the sweetest soundin' motor I ever heard. Grinnin' all over our faces, Ned and I get set. She steps off down the field, swings into the air, and away we go, for the startin' field, as full of hope as any man could be without bustin'.

Pretty soon the field slides into view. There's a crowd pushin' around on it, and lined up, staggered in back of each other, are planes. We circle and come down, and taxi smoothly across the field. Then we

ground-loop neatly, and come amblin' back. Ned cuts the motor, and we hop out. For a minute we're busy registerin', and then official greaseballs push the plane into place, third in the line.

And there's the Stormbird, our deadly opponent, with its nose 'way out in front. As we come past it, the pilot comes away from it. It is Walker, lookin' uglier 'n ever, with gloatin' eyes and crooked sneer. We give him hard looks and want to go on, but he has somethin' to say.

"Yesterday was your innin', you hooters. Today is mine. I'm goin' to fly you off the map!"

"Not in that wash-tub!" I come back.

"Hush up, Benny!" Ned nudges me. "Walker, you're takin' all the joy out of this race. We want to fly with real flyers, not with crooks. Depend on it, man, we don't intend to be beaten by dirty play. And if you fly square, Walker— you've only primed yourself for the lickin' of your life!"

Walker glares a killin' look at us, and cusses us out as we pass on.

Then there's a squeal, and Jane Alton comes rushin' around the line of officials, followed by her Dad. She

runs up to Ned and, right out in public, gives him a big kiss. She talks fast as a whirlwind, bein' all jazzed up with excitement and hope. Her Dad just shakes us by the hand and says:

"In a few minutes you'll be off, boys. Remember—we're goin' to win."

We promise him—our hearts in our throats. That big Stormbird looks like a flyin' devil to us and winnin' won't be a cinch for anybody.

Jane asks, breathless: "Ned, won't you *please* take me along?"

Ned laughs. "No, Jane. It can't be done. I'm sorry."

"Oh, please!" she begs.

And he chuckles again, "No!"

Mr. Alton closes in then for a confidential talk with Ned; and Jane, in a minute, grabs my sleeve and pulls me a little bit aside.

"Benny, will you do somethin' for me?"

"Jane," I says, "All you've got to do is ask."

She pulls me aside a little farther. "Would you do it for me, even if it meant a lot to you?"

"Well, Jane," I say, "I guess I can equal anybody so far as doin' things for you is concerned. You know that."

She tugs me still farther, and we're gettin' close to the locker room.

"Benny," she says then, "I want to fly in this race with Ned."

I choke up at that unexpected request, but I might 'a' known Jane would 've been dyin' to get up in the air on this big occasion.

"Gosh, Jane!" I say. "We couldn't stow you away. It'd overweight the plane and hurt our chances to—"

"Oh, I don't want to stowaway!" she says. "I want you to let me take your place!"

Oh, boy! She was askin' the impossible. There she was, with her implorin' blue eyes close to mine, eyes shinin' with hope and fire, and beggin' me, beggin' me. No, sir, I couldn't let her do that—but there she was, a girl I just couldn't refuse if she'd asked for my life. Lettin' her go up in my place would be a crazy thing to do, but she kept beggin' me with little pleases and won't-yous, and Bennies, spoken soft like, and—Lord!

"If you let me get into your coveralls, and helmet and goggles, nobody'll ever know the diff'rence!" she said.

"Jane, please don't go beggin' me!" I begged her. "It ain't fair to me. I can't resist you any more 'n the tail of a plane can resist the prop. You know Ned would blow up if he heard of it, and your Dad—and Lord!"

"Benny, it's the only thing I've ever asked of you; and it means more to me than anything else in the world right now. I've *got* to fly in that race—*got* to. Benny—Benny—please!"

"Oh, Lord!"

"All you'd have to do is slip into that private locker and take off those overalls, and then stay out of sight. I'd just get in 'em, and climb into the plane, and stay there. Benny—please?"

"You can't do any good up there—"

"Don't you know that Ned will fly worlds better if I'm along with him? And you want us to win, don't you?"

"Oh, Lord!" I said. "Well—here goes!"

Right then she flung her arms around my neck, hugged me close, and kissed me one, two, three times right on the lips, and said, "Oh, Benny!" And after that I wasn't nearly in my right mind. I dived into the locker, shed my overalls, and eased out again. With one last look at her, I dived into the crowd and lost myself.

Jane hurried into the locker, and in a minute she was out, in my coveralls and helmet and goggles. I could hardly believe my eyes, she looked so much like me! It was sure astonishin'. She eased back toward the planes, just when a guy in a megaphone was shoutin' the last warnin'. Jane walked right past Ned and Mr. Alton and made for the plane.

"I've got to get into the ship!" Ned said. "Say, where's Jane? Ain't she goin' to wish me good luck?"

They looked around for her, while she was within ten feet of 'em.

"Say, Benny, have you seen Jane?" Ned hollered at her; and she wags her head: no!

The last minute is gone; and Ned is forced to his plane. Jane was already in when he got there; he climbs in, not givin' her any special notice. There is

a poppin' and roarin' of motors all around, up and down the line. Greaseballs turn the Alton over, and she sings a sweet tune. The whole line-up is stirrin' up a tornado when *bang!* a shot-gun goes off—which means the race is started!

The Stormbird tears off like a maniac, lifts, climbs steady, and then deadheads on. Thirty seconds pass, forty, fifty, sixty. Then, *bango!* the gun goes off again, and the Imp plane stretches itself out across the sand. It lifts, roars, pulls on, and flies in the wake of the Stormbird.

Ned Knight bends to his stick and glues his eyes to the instrument. The seconds are tickin' off. Forty—fifty—sixty! *Whacko!* The gun! Ned stomps on the gas. Away goes the Alton. It takes off quick, climbs fast and, roarin' high, plows into the sky.

And I, back on the field, watch it go with tears in my eyes!

One by one, at sixty-second intervals, the planes take off, and soon they're parading along the sky, and trailin' out of sight. Once they're gone, there is nothin' to do but wait for reports along the way. The crowd lingers, and I avoid Mr. Alton. He goes to his car; I just float around. What's happenin' to Ned and

Jane now, I wonder? What's goin to happen to 'em as they drive across half a dozen states. Are they goin' to pull onto Long Island and get down to Curtiss first? Oh, Lord!

Well, plenty happened in that plane on the way, and this is what!

Ned Knight concentrated on his controls as he had never concentrated before. In the back seat Jane just sat and enjoyed herself. Little by little the Alton went up to her top speed. With the throttle gradually opened, she tore through the sky screaming. With the wires shrieking, the struts rattling, the whole plane trembling and throbbing, it roared on its way, hell-bent for victory.

The string of planes kept goin' across the sky spaced like they were at the take off for a while. At the Ohio line one of them began to drop, and took to the ground, disabled, and disqualified, 'cause the race was a non-stop affair. Another one soon followed. Others began to draw back a little, and still others drove ahead a little. And while Ned was strivin' to pass the Impco and reach the Stormbird, Jane removed her helmet and goggles, and then reached forward and gently tapped his shoulder.

Ned looked back; for a minute he thought he was dreamin'. Then he shouted something that was lost in the thunder of the motors, and bored on. He couldn't snap off the ignition a minute; 't would slow the plane. Jane smiled at him, still enjoyin' every minute; and then he looked back again, and grinned. He'd caught onto the joy of the thing and then Jane was satisfied.

Ned bent to his controls again, for the Impco was slippin' closer. It wasn't bearin' up under the continued, terrific strain. Ned grasped the opportunity and kept the throttle wide open. Bit by bit the Impco slid back, and Ned gave it a wide berth. Slowly, but surely, the Alton advanced. For miles the planes bobbed side by side; and then the Alton crept forward, inch by inch, until it was leadin'.

Jane gaily waved at the Impco pilot and threw him a couple of kisses!

The Alton bored on, and Ned concentrated on the Stormbird. It was still thundering on, a strong ship, much better than the Imp, perhaps equal to ours—perhaps even better! Ned kept the throttle wide; and Jane settled down to the serious business of takin' the lead.

The earth was bobbin' below the planes, slidin' by

gentle but fast; one town and another came into view and disappeared. And then the Alton began to wobble. The motor roared up and down. Ned was actin' funny with the controls. Jane watched him close; and then she saw Ned's head bob, and his shoulders slide forward. Just then the ship began to dive and lose speed.

"Ned!" Jane screeched, grabbing his shoulder and shakin' him. "What's the matter?"

He pulled himself together some, looked around; and in his eyes was a dreamy, sick look. Jane shook him again; but he acted almost drunk. His lips mumbled words that were lost in the motor's roar; but Jane knew that something was very much wrong with him.

The ship was losin' speed; the Stormbird was leading by a long distance; and even the Imp was drawing close again. Jane didn't wait for any more trouble. She unsnapped her safety belt and, calm as you please, put one leg across and into the fore pit. Then she pulled forward, and came into the pit with Ned. She crammed herself down into and on him, and grabbed the stick. Ned's feet were loose on the rudder-bars, but the stabilizer kept the plane on an even keel without much help from the controls.

Jane shook Ned again; and he was conkin' out fast. He pulled off one glove and looked at his right hand. It was red and swole up, and across it was a red streak, a scratch. He looked up with eyes full of pitiful request for help, and tried to talk. Jane was desperate; she cut the switch to hear him.

"Sick," he mumbled. "Scratch—somebody on field. Bumped against me. Must be—poisoned. Oh,—I can't—go on——"

And he slumped forward in the pit. Jane snapped on the ignition, kept the stick steady, pulled Ned back up, and pleaded in his ear.

"Try, Ned! Try to get up! Try to get back into the other pit. I'll handle the stick. You get back—try! Please try!"

Sick as he was, he tried. He dragged himself up and tottered in the air, while Jane assisted all she could. Then Ned tumbled into the rear pit, half on the seat, and without makin' a move to get up, passed out completely.

Jane settled to the controls with all the fire she had—which was plenty! She snapped on the ignition and opened the throttle wide as she could. The motor

blasted. The plane almost jumped ahead. The Imp, which was almost nose to nose with the Alton again, gradually dropped back. There was the Stormbird, far ahead. Jane fixed her blue eyes on that plane, and kept the throttle open, and prayed.

She didn't understand perfectly then what had happened to Ned. It was this: while he was on the field, talkin' with Alton—while Jane was talkin' with me, private!—somebody brushed past him, and then Ned discovered a scratch on his hand, lookin' like it was made by a pin. He thought nothin' of it, but that scratch was full of a drug. What it was we don't know yet, but it was powerful, and without the shadow of a doubt it had been used by somebody in the Stormbird people's pay—somebody, probably at Stud Walker's behest. The object was to put the Alton out of the race by cripplin' its pilot—and, if it hadn't been for Jane, the trick would have succeeded! But with Jane at the stick, it was far from succeedin'!

Jane stretched that ship to the limit. The Imp bobbed far behind. Territory unreeled under her. The Stormbird loomed large again. Both ships were goin' their limit. The race settled down to a question of which ship had the more speed and power and stamina, and the victor would be decided by a very

narrow margin. Jane kept the throttle wide, and waited for the Alton to do its stuff—and it did.

Slowly she drew up. She kept the Alton on a level with the Stormbird's tail for a hundred miles. Then slowly the differences in the ships began to tell. The Alton crept up. An inch. Another inch. Another inch—forward always, at a mad airspeed, the motor blasting like a demon loose out of hell, the whole ship shaking, the wires screaming. The earth spun and veered. Another inch—another. Little by little the Alton crept up on the Stormbird until, prop even with prop, they drove ahead without either gainin' a mite.

Once again the Stormbird began to slip back; and Jane—yes!—tossed Mr. Stud Walker an ironic kiss!

Jane kept that ship howlin'. On she went. On. The skies began to darken. The air got a little bumpy. The visibility dropped. The exhaust tubes of the planes, white-hot, spouted orange fire. And Jane drove on. Little by little, again, the Alton took its margin of lead.

What was that? Water! Long Island Sound! Only a few miles away was the finish field!

Jane kept the plane drivin'. The Stormbird howled on the Alton's tail. Both planes were crazy flyin' things—crazy.

Then the field, the big square! Closer and closer! Jane stepped down to it, slowin' as little as possible. Down she swooped, and the ground swung up at her. She felt the trucks touch. She zipped across the sand; she ground looped; she trundled back. And as she came to a stop, and the crowd started for her, the Stormbird dropped out of the sky.

Jane jumped out of her plane. She knew Ned wasn't seriously hurt, but he needed help, and to the first man she saw she shouted: "Get a doctor!" Then, with reporters mobbin' her, she just smiled, gave her name and that of the plane, and waited until a fat man with an official badge, head of the Committee, came up to her. Then she said pertly:

"Well, I guess I won, didn't I?"

The Committeeman was flabbergasted. He hadn't expected to see a girl. Reporters were yowlin' for Jane's name, and facts about her, knowin' that a girl hadn't been scheduled to pilot the Alton, and sensin' a big story. The Committeeman muffed a few words, not knowin' what to do or say, but seein' plain enough that she had got to the field first.

Then a man in leather tunic and with goggle-prints around his eyes came pushin' through the crowd, with four other Committeemen, all lookin' indignant and outraged. That guy was Walker—Walker was howlin'.

"There she is!" he yelped. "This race is bein' run on the square, ain't it? Well, you can't rate her winner. She isn't the pilot that belongs to that ship. Her name is Alton—the pilot registered for this plane is named Knight!"

The Committeeman got red-faced and mad and still more dignified. They waved a hand for silence and bellowed to the reporters, after a hot and fast conference among themselves:

"The Alton is not the winner of this race. The Alton is not the winner! It is disqualified because of irregularities. The official winner of the race is the Stormbird, with Walker pilotin'!"

"Just a minute!" Jane spoke up, pert and clear. "Where are the irregularities? The Alton has come through clean, without any. The pilot of this ship is supposed to be Knight, and it wins the race because *my name is* Knight!"

That's a poser.

"I intended to fly this ship all along!" Jane declared. "And I win the race—"

"Your name is Knight?" the Committeemen demanded in one big voice.

"Yes, indeed," said Jane. "Mrs. Ned Knight. It has been that since last evenin'. So there!"

* * * * *

Whenever I see Jane comin' onto the testin' field of the big, boomin', prosperous Alton factory, to take a little sky-spin with her husband, I size her up and sigh and tell myself all over again that that girl sure looks right in a flyin' suit!

THE END

Plane Jane

Frederick C. Davis

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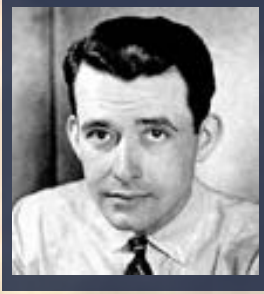

Frederick Clyde Davis was an American pulp writer. He was educated at Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, and became a professional writer at the age of 22. Davis wrote several novels featuring his series detective, Professor Cy Hatch.

PLANE JANE